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SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: TOPICS IN FREEDOM

1. Summary: The Omani Internet chat room "Sablat al-Arab" -- or simply "Al-Sablah" -- is the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language forum for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, Al-Sablah nevertheless offers a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

--- Proposed Free Trade Agreement Between The U.S. And Oman
--- Freedom Of The Press
--- New Oman Journalists' Association

End summary.

Freedom To Trade

2. The proposed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the United States and the Sultanate of Oman generated a large number of postings among Al-Sablah members, particularly with regards to its potential effect on the economic condition of Omani citizens. A few commentators viewed the FTA in a favorable light; one observed, "America did not select these countries [FTA partners] randomly. Rather, there were certain criteria for joining an FTA, such as security, stability, potential tourism, and political harmony with neighboring countries." Another FTA supporter noted, "America seeks to encourage vibrant economic competition within the Gulf, and this competition could lead an economic revival."

3. However, the majority of responses viewed the FTA with suspicion and skepticism. "We do not believe that America wants to improve the lives of GCC citizens. The whole agreement is nothing more than propaganda, designed to further open foreign markets for American products," wrote one member. Opined another, "These agreements only serve to ensure America's presence in the region." Another asked, "How will Oman benefit from this agreement? Are we going to export our products to the United States? Do the Americans need Omani products, and vice-versa?" One of the more impassioned responses read, "This agreement is killing our dignity, and we do not support or desire any partnership with people who are killing our brothers in Iraq and Palestine. Why don't the Arab countries unite to create a huge economic entity, which could overcome the abuses of foreigners?"

Freedom Of Speech

4. Another hot topic in Al-Sablah concerned freedom of the press in Oman, related to recent rumors about the government's supposed "ban" on two Omani writers from publishing or appearing on television. The author of the topic wrote, "The Sultan issued a royal decree allowing the establishment of private media outlets, but what does the law really say? Does it give us more freedom to say and write what we feel? Is this freedom actually practiced, or is it merely ink on paper?"

5. Nearly all the responses doubted the existence of genuine media freedom. One contributor claimed, "The laws concerning the media have not really changed for the past twenty years. The only reason we are talking about this is because of the scandal concerning the banning of the two Omani writers, and we had to learn about the ban from regional newspapers!" One hopeful member opined that "The new law might make us able to criticize the defects of the Majlis Al-Shura (Consultative Council) and Majlis Al-Dawla (State Council)," but most respondents agreed with the writer who penned, "The situation will never change in Oman until the people running this country have been changed from top to bottom."

Freedom To Assemble

6. On a related note, Al-Sablah members also reacted to the news that the Ministry of Social Development officially approved the registration of the new Oman Journalists' Association. Many

forum participants questioned the role of such an association, fearing the heavy hand of the government. "It is going to be run by the government since we have heard that the Board of Directors will be appointed by the Ministry of Information," wrote one member. Another argued, "There will not be any difference between the Association and the Ministry of Information; indeed, the Association will be a continuation of it." Other members questioned the Association's relationship with the extant Press Club, which is part of the Ministry of Information. Moreover, some forum members felt that membership in the Association will be restricted: "The Association should be a private, non-profit organization for all writers and journalists. However, if you want to join the Association, you must obtain permission from the Ministry of Information. How is that free?"

BALTIMORE